

BLACK CANYON OF THE GUNNISON NATIONAL MONUMENT

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Welcome to Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument. You are beginning a 6-mile drive along one of America's most awesome canyons. Parking areas are provided at the heads of varying length trails which lead to the rim of the gorge. Every lookout has a different view, and each view is more spectacular than the one before. This pamphlet is a brief outline of what you could expect to see along the trails and at the overlook points.

You are now at TOMICHI POINT. Tomichi is an Indian name of rather obscure and varying definitions, none of which seem to have anything to do with this point. Since this is your first view of this mighty gash in the earth's crust, you probably have various reactions to the scene. For the most part, the canyon is cut deeply into the very basement rocks of the earth. The many layers of sedimentary rocks have long since vanished. The dark walls are metamorphic and very hard. Knowing this you will have even more appreciation for the powers of erosion.

The cutting was, and still is, being done by the Gunnison River. At flood stage (before the upriver dams) it carried huge volumes of water. Through the Monument section of the canyon the river drops at the rate of about 95 feet per mile. This was a powerful source and the origin of the canyon is not so unbelievable when you consider the volume, speed, abrasive material carried in the water, and the length of time that the river has flowed through the canyon.

If you have only a limited amount of time and wish to see the most spectacular views, we suggest you confine your stops to the following three trails. First, stop at Gunnison Point, view the exhibits in the visitor center, then go to the overlook out back and peer down into this massive cut in the earth's surface. Note the cleavage or vertical layers of rocks. Keep these shapes in mind as you travel on and see how the walls change. Next, stop at CHASM VIEW, the most awesome of all the overlooks. Note how

the canyon walls change in character from rough, jagged sloping walls to smooth, sheer, almost vertical cliffs. No longer do you see the vertical cleavage so noticeable at Gunnison Point.

From Chasm View drive to SUNSET VIEW. A complete change in the canyon's makeup lies before you now. The canyon deepens and widens, and the walls slope much less steeply. The river makes a rather sharp bend and heads north. It is visible for some distance before it turns and disappears behind the black walls of the lower canyon.

If your trip is more leisurely and your endurance hasn't lessened too much at this altitude, we suggest you hike other trails. Hopefully, this booklet will help you select the ones of most interest to you.

We have already outlined Gunnison Point area earlier. The next trail, PULPIT ROCK is behind the Rim House. This overlook reminded someone of a pulpit. One look at the river far below and the shape of the overlook is quickly forgotten. Far below, a deep pool in the Gunnison River hints of huge, hungry fish. Water in this deep pool, slowed and momentarily blocked by a natural barrier of rocks in the streambed, turns from the quiet waters of the pool to rushing white water as it passes the barrier and disappears behind the sheer cliff walls.

CROSS FISSURES OVERLOOK is a longer walk. This lookout gets its name from the joints or cracks in the rock wall which has weathered away leaving huge blocks or rock islands standing away from the rim. There are two viewpoints from this area; one looking into the main canyon and the other into a side draw. From the parking lot at Cross Fissures you can look across and see the next trail.

ROCK POINT TRAIL leads out over a narrow knife-like ridge or pegmatite dike. In the early morning the reflections of a million "diamonds" will shine and sparkle as the sunlight bounces off the planes of crystals of mica, feldspar, quartz, and tiny garnets. Beautiful in this light, their value is only in their ability to enrich your walk. You can see the banding effect of dikes across the canyon. On the north wall notice the long draw leading from the river far below to the rim far above. Climbers named it Long Draw and any who have climbed it feel it is well named. If the wind is not blowing you can hear the roar of the river and sense its power even at this distance.

The small evergreens that have found pockets of soil and moisture on the ridges and block islands are Douglas fir. You can see that factors for their existence are marginal. Through a tiny crack in the wall you can see part of the river far below. Notice the difference in the canyon walls. The pegmatite material tends to stabilize the walls, creating sheer cliffs instead of sloping walls.

DEVILS LOOKOUT - Why the name? Awe inspiring views, sheer cliffs, and barren, inhospitable places seem to inspire thoughts of the devil. Perhaps this is how the overlook got its name.

From here you can look across the canyon up Grizzly Gulch and see the entrance road to the North Rim. This small rounded valley that cut through two high mesas once was a stream able to cut down to this level because of its large watershed. Later, other streams cut into its headwaters. Now, only a small intermittent stream flows through the drainage, which like others, hangs far above the river forming what geologists call hanging valleys. Grizzly Gulch and the two mesas provide an effective frame for the West Elk Mountains in the background.

The next overlook is a mile away. Chasm View is one of the three we mentioned earlier as a must if you were to make your visit to Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument worth the trip.

Look upstream from the overlook and see what looks like a waterfall about two feet high. Actually it is about 40 feet high. Directly below the overlook the river disappears beneath the rocks. These rocks are boxcar and small house size. Here you see the reasons float trips through the Monument are not possible. All such trips end up being mostly pack trips with considerable rock scrambling. Here the canyon is only 1300 feet wide but over 1700 feet deep. Three Washington Monuments would span it but three would not reach the rim from the river.

The next viewpoint is called PAINTED WALL. Streaked with whitish bands, varying in shapes and width without rhyme or reason, the opposite wall of the canyon looks as though someone went wild with a paint brush. These bands are made up of material called pegmatite. Injected into the base rock under terrific pressure the molten material forced its way up along the joints and cracks forcing apart the base rock to make room for itself. Finally, its pressure exhausted, it hardened into the streaks you see before you.

These light bands are harder than the base rocks that make up the bulk of the cliff and by a sort of buttressing action make the sheer walls which you see possible.

At CEDAR POINT is a staked nature trail. The two viewpoints are outstanding. Your walk to the overlooks will give you a chance to see quite a variation of plants; the yucca, oakbrush, serviceberry, and mountain mahogany and a closeup of some of the pinyon and juniper. Notice the damage to the pinyon by the porcupines. You will probably be impressed by the juniper growth pattern. In some cases the entire tree looks dead, except for a sprig of green here and there.

From DRAGON POINT if your imagination is good, you can see a formation that resembles a dragon, shaped by the bands on the Painted Wall. From this viewpoint you can also get a close look at one of the highest and sheerest cliffs in Colorado. The rim across from you is a sheer 2200 feet above the river. Several of the juniper along the trail look like oversize bonsai, the small contorted tree of Japanese fame.

At SUNSET VIEW a visitor is rewarded by a vast expanse of the lower canyon and its different formations. The narrow trench widens and deepens as the walls fall away at a lesser angle. Beyond the canyon and the mesa tops, the huge mass of the Grand Mesa looms up on the horizon.

The last stop is HIGH POINT, the turn-around and picnic area. Notice the change in vegetation. Deeper soil probably accounts for this vegetation change. This parking lot is also the start of the Warner Point Nature Trail. A stake and leaflet trail guides you .7 of a mile along a ridge from which you have exceptional views of the canyon, the valley, and the distant San Juan Mountains and Grand Mesa. From this parking lot the vista formed by the West Elks is beautifully framed by the mesas across the canyon to the northeast.

You have now completed the drive on the South Rim of the Black Canyon. What was your impression? What you have seen in a short time is a long chapter in the earth's history, a chapter not yet



finished. The intricate patterns and processes that make possible the life, of which we know so little, are many. You have viewed one of these processes in your tour of the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument - the wearing away of the earth in one place and deposition in another. Erosion, like mountain building, is and has been, a natural process since the earth began. The Black Canyon is an outstanding example of stream erosion.

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